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City Walls as Historic Urban Landscape: a Case Study on Participatory Education.

Bonadei, R.^{*}

Cisani, M.[†]

Viani, E.[‡]

University of Bergamo (Italy)

ABSTRACT

The concept of Historic Urban Landscape, which now guides the conservation and promotion of numerous heritage sites across the world, is based on the recognition of the complexity of the urban environment, seen as a dynamic system of cultural and natural features. This paper aims at presenting an ongoing reassessment of the meaning of a historic artefact in the city of Bergamo, Italy, which is part of a broader system of defence built by the Venetian Republic between the 15th and 17th centuries. Among the many related initiatives, one was launched by the University of Bergamo and involved nearly a hundred primary school children in a series of multidisciplinary workshops. Children worked to produce a guidebook and a short animated film aimed at reconstructing the meanings and the values embodied by the Venetian Walls, an enduring cultural icon surrounding the medieval upper town. This project is triggering both downscaling and upscaling dynamics in the regeneration process of this historic urban infrastructure. It also contributes to the creation and sharing of new meanings around this heritage, which are strongly related to its value for the citizenship as well as for the visitors.

Keywords: Historic Urban Landscape; UNESCO; Participatory Processes; Heritage Education

Il concetto di Paesaggio Storico Urbano, che oggi guida la conservazione e la promozione di numerosi siti UNESCO in tutto il mondo, si basa sul riconoscimento della complessità dell'ambiente urbano, visto come un sistema dinamico composto da

^{*} E-mail address: rossana.bonadei@unibg.it

[†] E-mail address: margherita.cisani@unibg.it

[‡] E-mail address: elena.viani@unibg.it

elementi culturali e naturali. L'articolo si propone di presentare alcune prime riflessioni relative al significato delle Mura Venete, un importante manufatto storico della città di Bergamo, parte di un più ampio sistema di difesa costruito dalla Repubblica di Venezia tra il XV e il XVII secolo. Tra le tante iniziative correlate alla candidatura UNESCO di questo sito, una di esse è stata promossa dall'Università degli Studi di Bergamo e ha coinvolto circa un centinaio di alunni della scuola primaria in una serie di workshop multidisciplinari, che hanno portato alla produzione di una guida cartacea e di un cortometraggio animato, volti a ricostruire e rinnovare i significati e i valori espressi dalle Mura venete, icona culturale e turistica della città di Bergamo. L'analisi condotta porta ad evidenziare come sia possibile applicare il concetto di Paesaggio Storico Urbano anche ad iniziative di piccola scala e di stampo educativo basate sulla partecipazione di diversi stakeholder locali. Infine, il contributo sottolinea come tale iniziativa stia attivando dinamiche trans-scalari nonché la creazione e la condivisione di nuovi significati legati a questo patrimonio, fortemente connessi al suo valore per la cittadinanza nonché per i visitatori.

Keywords: Paesaggio Storico Urbano; UNESCO; Processi Partecipativi; Educazione al Patrimonio

Introduction

This paper presents insights and possible future developments related to a participatory process of heritage education which addresses young students and draws inspiration from the concept of Historic Urban Landscape (HUL). It is based on the analysis of a project carried out in Bergamo (Italy) about the historic Venetian Walls which surround the medieval upper city, a site shortlisted in 2015 by the UNESCO World Heritage Commission as part of the wider international network of Venetian Works of Defence. The project, entitled *Retelling the Walls* was launched and developed between June and December 2015 by a multi-disciplinary team of researchers of the University of Bergamo which included cultural analysts, sociologists, geographers and tourism scholars. Its primary aims were to heighten social awareness of this heritage site in accordance with UNESCO guidelines and recommendations and to promote knowledge of the urban landscape of Bergamo, and especially of the Walls as its iconic landmark. The first section of the paper lays out the theoretical background which shaped the project and guided the design of its products, and defines initial research questions. The second section briefly describes the project itself, its various phases and the partners involved. The concluding section presents project details and outputs, and ventures reflections on how collaborative endeavours of this kind can benefit the local community, in terms both of re-appropriation of new meanings related to this artefact, and of new perspectives and experiential tools provided to the various communities of citizens (including temporary citizens such as tourists).

1. Landscape, historic heritage and participation

1.1 A theoretical framework of cross-fertilising concepts

In recent academic literature, historical cultural heritage refers to a dynamic system that evolves over time, undergoing changes which are caused by a wide range of economic, social and cultural forces (Bandarin & Oers, 2012; Bonadei, 2014; Pendlebury et al., 2009). It is a system continually submitted to processes of re-interpretation and re-appropriation on the part of the community to which it belongs. Within the UNESCO approach to certain complex landscapes such as cities, the notion of a constant evolution is paramount (UNESCO, 2011; 2013). Accordingly, conservation and management should be characterized by a dynamic perspective, involving community, different perspectives on the heritage itself, and promoting synergies, creativity and innovative programmes. A dynamic and holistic approach, applied to new initiatives concerning the promotion and preservation of urban landscape through an experimental process, can in fact bring new meanings to cultural heritage, as shown in this paper.

The use of the term landscape is crucial here, as it refers to a complex and productive concept, which currently animates academic debate especially in geography (Wylie, 2007) but also in other disciplines such as ecology or social anthropology (Antrop, 2005; Ingold, 2000). The concept of landscape, in fact, lying between objectivity and

subjectivity, refers not only to the physical environment but also to the cultural and social meanings which shape our feelings and our attachment to it, our sense of belonging to a place. Scazzosi (2004) stresses the importance of the fact that:

(...) there is a significant mainstream convergence towards a global and unitary vision of landscape, i.e. a tendency to integrate nature and culture, a shift in interest from outstanding places of excellence (natural or anthropic) to the whole territory, an assertion of the right to quality in all the living places of the populations who are invited to participate actively in such a process (Scazzosi, 2004, p. 336).

Therefore, the instruments and processes of identification, conservation and promotion of outstanding sites of cultural heritage and those meant for the management of ordinary landscape, like the ones proposed by the European Convention of Landscape (Council of Europe, 2000), are growing ever closer. Moreover, according to the ICOMOS Washington Charter, “historic urban areas, large and small, include cities, towns and historic centres or quarters, together with their natural and man-made environments. Beyond their role as historical documents, these areas embody the values of traditional urban cultures” (ICOMOS, 1987, p. 1).

From this definition derives the one referred to the Historic Urban Landscape as “the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of ‘historic centre’ or ‘ensemble’ to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting” (UNESCO, 2011, p. 52). The Historic Urban Heritage, seen as a landscape, is an expression of the diversity of societies throughout history, and it includes a strong, intangible dimension related to identity (Taylor, 2016). That is why the participation and involvement of residents are essential for the success of conservation programmes and why UNESCO’s approach effectively brings together the goals of urban heritage conservation and those of social and economic development. This recent kind of approach aims at preserving the quality of the environment, enhancing the sustainable use of urban spaces and promoting social and functional diversity. Former criteria such as uniqueness and integrity are less prominent, while communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, gain an important role in the production of tangible and intangible cultural sites. They are seen as major actors in the safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation of the site, and thereby contribute to enhance cultural diversity and creativity. According to the new UNESCO directives, summed up in the concept of Historic Urban Landscape (Bandarin & Oers, 2012), historic architectures should not be treated as external features of the city, detached from its modern and vital components, but as parts of the city as a whole and as aspects of its residents’ identity. Universities and the academic world are called to participate in this strategy actively, because they can provide invaluable theoretical tools for expanding the scope and the implications of the ongoing debate.

1.2 Addressing complexity through participatory education

The project described here, coordinated by the scientific team of Bergamo University, takes on an interdisciplinary approach to landscape which fully embraces the urban

heritage and the identity embodied in the Walls of Bergamo. A wide range of interpretations of the values and meanings of the heritage site exists among academics and citizens. Historians may stress the issue of origins and expand on the historical circumstances of its construction while architects often highlight the artistic value and the use of specific materials. Similarly, each citizen has his or her own perception of an historic site, which may derive from aesthetic, emotional, cultural and relational values or from the experiences attached to it. Landscape, and the heritage embedded in it, will thus be submitted to different gazes, coming from the manifold community of actors and local stakeholders, but also from external points of view, such as those belonging to the scientific community or to tourists (Urry, 1990).

Planning and managing a complex and dynamic system such as the one formed by landscape, heritage and culture (Mascari et al., 2009) requires, first of all, awareness of the multiple sets of forces acting on the scene. It also requires new tools and methods to foster the creativity, resilience and sustainability of the city as an urban historic landscape. According to the HUL approach, local communities are expected to launch participative processes based on ground-breaking pilot projects, such as the one in Bergamo discussed here.

In this study, the research team decided to adopt a participatory process model, aimed at enhancing the relations with local partners and consolidating the scientific and proactive role of the University in the Bergamo area. The model was inspired by theories on co-production (Ostrom, 1996) and more generally by the paradigm of the so called New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010). Even though, as Selman points out, community-based initiatives cannot possibly replace the institutional management of extensive sites, participatory approaches seem more effective in circumscribed settings (Selman, 2004), contexts that are limited in terms of scale but also, as in this case, in terms of target and outputs.

Participatory processes are for this reason considered a core element in the inclusive approaches, because they can effectively assist decision makers in coping with critical issues, thereby translating theoretical concepts into viable practices (Leone & Zoppi, 2016). This approach, developed as it was during the initial process of involvement of stakeholders, also turns out to be particularly useful for consolidating social ties among different levels of stakeholders in the area.

Bobbio (2004) reminds us that participation should be implemented with an attitude of respect towards participants and customized in relation to precise targets. He also warns us that opinions of specific social groups, namely those of younger generations, are too often neglected or misrepresented in participative processes. To address the latter issue, the project *Retelling the Walls* has been designed specifically to involve young students, especially of primary school age (7 to 9 years old).

Davies and Merchant (2010) have conclusively shown that the educational experience of school children may be significantly enriched by the use of media, such as animated video, which involves young students and makes them feel part of a community. To this end, detailed interactive workshops based on a variety of tools and technologies were developed. The underlying aim is both to familiarize the young with the opinions and attitudes of citizens towards this heritage, and to involve them in the preservation and conservation of historical urban artefacts.

1.3 Research questions

The case presented here is characterized by awareness of the social dynamism and of the holistic meanings of the Venetian Walls, therefore it is at the same time dynamic and heterogeneous in its structure. The project *Retelling the Walls* involved different stakeholders in charge of the conservation of the artefact as well as other subjects, who are bearers of cultural identity. However, it is not directly equivalent to state-led and planning-oriented projects of heritage conservation and/or urban renewal that adopt the HUL approach.

The first question addressed in this paper, therefore, is whether the HUL approach may be successfully employed in a small-scale participatory project of heritage education and awareness. In addition, while the project's premises and key concepts are explicitly defined and shared among the actors involved since the beginning, reflection on its actual outputs and on the dynamics it triggers is a much more complex task. The second question is thus aimed at identifying and qualifying the kind of dynamics that may be initiated through activities of participative and collaborative education. One of these dynamics certainly relates to the way the built heritage is seen and experienced by the people (citizens as well as tourists).

The third and last question will focus on the ways participatory processes can produce a new perspective or gaze on historic sites. And along these lines it will also be crucial to note whether the new gaze can be recorded effectively by using new technological tools, suited not only to the local community but also to the tourist community.

2. The project *Retelling the Walls*

In light of the considerations made above, the Venetian Works of Defence in Bergamo¹ provide a perfect case study for testing the new Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 2011. The promotion of a participative and educational project on this heritage site gives a chance to investigate the cultural implications of a multifaceted gaze from which this landscape is perceived and lived and to test possible benefits for the local and tourist community.

The comprehensive goal of the project (undertaken thanks to the financial contribution of the Lombardy Region, through EU funding and the FSE development fund) was to design and create two educational tools (a video and a guidebook for children, both entirely devoted to the Walls as a historic landscape) through a participative process focused on the Venetian Walls as a UNESCO Heritage site and based on multidisciplinary workshops with primary school children. The analysis of this process and of its results will demonstrate how even a relatively small-scale project can activate interesting dynamics related to the heritage itself, to the local community and to its relationships with other contexts.

Since, as explained, the underlying goal of the project is the triggering of a participatory process, the project includes different partners with different roles. First-level partners are the main partners that proposed and defined the project (University of Bergamo, Ghisleni Primary School, Municipality of Bergamo). Second-level partners are other associations and local groups already active in preserving this urban landscape (*Terra di*

San Marco Association, Bergamo Botanic Garden, Bergamo Hills Natural Regional Park and Natural History Museum). The Bozzetto Animation Studio and the designer of the guidebook were also part of this group of actors, being involved in the definition of the communication and educational outputs. Third-level partners are other institutions and non-governmental associations (Cooperativa l'Impronta, Fondazione Bergamo nella Storia) which were involved later, as active in the life of the community and important agents among the many social forces primary school students should be aware of.

All the activities – including project design – were developed from June to December 2015 after a shared initial phase of definition and scheduling of the activities. Then, a total of 15 workshops, indoor and outdoor, were held with about 120 primary school students (three classes), during which members of the University team were present to capture and understand the set of new meanings that the students assigned to the heritage artefact. These meanings were then expressed and built into the video and the guidebook, which in turn enabled the team to promote a number of communication and dissemination initiatives.

The children guidebook² is meant to motivate children to explore the city walls from three different perspectives and routes. It is the result of a painstaking process of content negotiation and discussion with teacher and children: the wide range of contents that emerged during the workshops were summarized by teachers in the form of a list, which the team then translated into points of interest and then itineraries.

The leading concepts which emerged during the workshops and guided the interpretation of rejuvenation regard mainly ecology, history and contemporary society. The students were prompted to reflect upon the complexity of the natural landscape using various educational tools and to see, for instance, how native vegetation and wild animals coexist with human elements inside this urban environment. They were also led to explore the reasons why this defensive system was built in the first place and to assess the destructive consequences of that action on the pre-existent city; to consider the dynamic nature of cities and the meanings and reasons of events bound to the historical context; to reflect on the need for conservation of historical architectures as well as for their rejuvenation with new functions and values; to look at social values as an intangible heritage that individuals and communities built across time; to keep in mind emotional values such as the feeling of being safe and protected and the desire to “open the Wall’s gates” and meet “the different” that lies beyond.

As for the children tour-guide, the goal of the short film³ realized by Studio Bozzetto was to show the Walls and their values to children by using their own words and refer back to the concepts they learned during the activities and workshops. Filmed with the use of a drone and post-produced with the addition of animation, the video describes the Walls’ centennial history.

3. Case study analysis

The project analysis is primarily based on a qualitative approach. Specifically, the data and information on which insights are drawn come from the project’s meeting notes and shared documents (such as the topic and schedule of each workshop); the project’s public documents and output; general statistics related to communication

and dissemination. The following sections present observations and answers to each of the three questions previously identified.

3.1 Historic Urban Landscape as a tool for heritage education and awareness

The brief description of the project in the previous paragraph enables us to highlight three key features – goal, scale and actors – which place this case study in relation to other kind of projects more frequently considered as heritage conservation or urban renewal initiatives, both in Italy and abroad (Bonfantini, 2015; Taylor, 2016).

First of all, in the Bergamo project, the HUL approach has been applied to guide an initiative mainly related to the intangible values of the urban heritage. As outlined in the project definition, the guiding aim is less to implement actual changes in the urban layout than to produce tools for education and heritage promotion, mainly addressed to children but also to the entire citizenship and other city users such as tourists. Nonetheless, the materials produced in the course of the initiative represent a lasting heritage, not only for the school involved and its teachers, but also for cultural centres throughout the city (libraries, municipal and provincial archives, tourist offices, cultural associations, multimedia labs), to which they were made readily available. The short film, in particular, is an invaluable flexible instrument, because it is easily disseminated online and can be brought to the attention of multiple targets and possibly different nations, including UNESCO application partners.³ Also, insofar as they draw attention to the hidden, dynamic and vernacular values of the Walls, both products reinforce the vision of the city as a system under constant change, not so much in relation to processes of urban renewal, but rather as an alternative to a process of “museumification”.

The project’s scope and boundaries are clearly set out, because they focus operationally on the activities of three primary classes around and about the Walls of Bergamo and their surroundings. This is important because it enabled the research team to ensure the direct involvement of individuals commonly disregarded in planning and heritage conservation programs, such as children, who represent the non-expert and non-qualified point of view.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that the actors involved fall within a complex and wide range. Even though students were the initial local stakeholder target for testing participation initiatives and possible benefits, the project de facto involved three levels of actors, as previously stated. They compose a network of public institutions, associations, organizations and citizens that is a vital element for the heritage artefact considered, since all these subjects not only cooperate to this project, but are also actively working on and with the Walls. In 2016, for instance, numerous activities were promoted: from public conferences about the artefact, to music concerts on the Walls; from scientific workshops to leisure events on the ramparts. That all goes to show that the network can be productive of new ideas.

Ultimately, with regard to the possibility of successfully applying the HUL approach to small-scale educational projects, our reflection on this case study seems to confirm the viability and desirability of this initiative, which has been found to instil valuable innovation in traditional programs of heritage education and awareness, even though

critical differences and specificities with respect to goals, scales and actors involved need to be kept constantly into account.

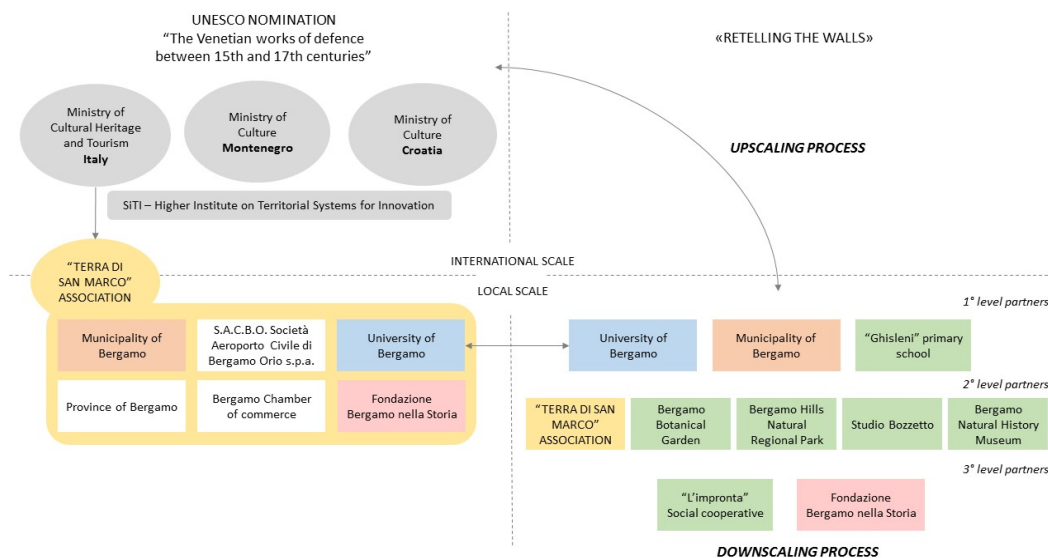
3.2 Downscaling and upscaling processes

As already mentioned, the project Retelling the Walls reinforced and triggered the expansion of a local network of stakeholders which is currently engaged in promoting knowledge and awareness on this historic urban landscape to foster the UNESCO nomination. The co-construction of the dynamic meaning of this heritage is therefore based on a downscaling process, which consists of the increasing and deepening of relationships and networks at a local scale.

On the other hand, an upscaling process is evidently at work. And since Bergamo is a member city of the aforementioned UNESCO transnational site proposal, during the project the experts and the teachers always referred to the Walls as part of a wider network of infrastructures built by the Venetians for the same defensive reason and with similar architectural styles and technologies. For instance, children were surprised in discovering that many architectural and artistic features that we see in Bergamo (such as the winged lion or the gate's structure) look almost the same as those in Zara, Croatia. This is an example of how it is possible to enhance knowledge, affection, sense of belonging and the capacity to establish international networks and links.⁴

The network of actors around the Retelling the Walls project is therefore multi-scalar, by virtue of the links that various actors (the Municipality and the University among others) maintain with the overall UNESCO nomination process. This is what enabled downscaling and lay the foundation for upscaling, towards mechanisms of international dissemination and replication (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Main stakeholders of the UNESCO nomination (right) and of the Retelling the Walls project (left), relationships and processes.



Source: Authors' elaboration

The workshops and on-site visits allowed students to get closer to the institutions and associations which in various ways are in charge of the preservation of this artefact, raising awareness of the role of the institutions and of the community as a whole. In addition, it is believed that the workshops increased awareness of an internationally shared heritage and, in turn, of a common European citizenship, as advocated by UNESCO (Convention on the Conservation of Heritage) and the EU.

The project, and its related public dissemination and communication activities (press conferences, meetings, press articles), worked as an effective catalyst for the forces directed to conservation of the heritage, and for citizens themselves. It motivated local partners and enabled them to share objectives and purposes, working jointly on a common target and on an international scale.

3.3 New gaze and rejuvenation

As brilliantly shown by scholars steeped into the history of the Venetian Republic, the Venetian Works of Defences are an intriguing artefact, the result of a war culture and of an imperial strategy which, unsurprisingly, used walls and fortresses in order to inscribe its presence onto a territory, to demarcate it and to protect it. Yet, those ingenious artefacts were placed there less to signify something individually, or any individual talent, than to outline a continuum and to give shape to a precise political landscape. That landscape is unique in its kind: it puts forth a meaning that tells us of identifications, or a more or less coerced sense of belonging. It is a cultural and architectural continuum that resists time, wars, destruction, and progressive national borders which were made and unmade over the next centuries, and engendered other signs, other values, other styles. Amalgamated with what is new, cross-bred with what is different, those signs are still there to tell a story that has somehow united distant and different people.

In rejuvenating the meanings of places, one key issue was the exploration of the dynamic function of the walls: originally a military artefact symbolizing war, defence, closure, fear and conflict, and yet now increasingly perceived as a complex natural and cultural system. A living landscape is there, behind the original trauma: a border has turned into a breach; military ramparts become sites for visits and walks; ancient borders interface with spaces for dialogue and for possible new relationships.

According to this new symbolization of the Walls, the local community – either consciously or unconsciously – is experiencing the Walls in a different way, and the workshops demonstrate this sense of altogether new re-appropriation. To schoolchildren first and to a wider network of actors next, the artefact becomes less a hard and solid architectural site, than a dynamic and experiential public space outlined in the guidebook and given full voice in the interactive medium of new technologies.

Conclusions

The research conducted so far has addressed a number of key queries and highlighted possible benefits and positive impacts brought about by this complex process. But our

preliminary observations could be explored further and yield valuable insights for future development, for instance for the testing of results and outputs via targeted questionnaires and interviews. This initial assessment of the project raises new questions: how can we effectively survey the range of different perceptions – and consequently record new behaviours – that have to do with the Walls among the local community? Is it possible to test differences in the perception of the artefact between students who were involved in the workshops and other non-participating students? How can we evaluate the strength of the new links among different levels of stakeholders? Are these links actual, active and proactive? Can we experiment with other participatory processes involving other segments of the population? If so, how? And for what kind of aims?

Moreover, in order to assess the efficacy of the guidebook and of the video introduced by the current line of research as new educational and tourist media, further ex-post investigations may be called for. These would help us conceptualize their tourist potential, for instance by considering the lasting appeal of these tools for tourists even after the end of the project and their possible feedback on the tools themselves.

The Venetian Walls of Bergamo are no longer useful in defending and closing the city: they are an opening and inclusive asset. Various practices, such as dog walking, jogging, picnics, events, concerts and meetings, take place there, especially during summer, while all year round many associations enliven these Walls: for instance, social gardening for the disabled or guided visits of the system of caves underneath the walls. These phenomena attest to a long-term rejuvenation process which is currently undergoing a process of acceleration, also fostered by the UNESCO nomination.

The Historic Urban Landscape approach sees and interprets the city as a continuum in time and space. It considers cultural diversity and creativity as key assets for human, social and economic development. To these ends, it is necessary to support the integration of environmental, social and cultural concerns into the planning, design and implementation of urban development. The multiple values embodied by historic architectures heritage, economic, environmental and socio-cultural need not conflict; they are complementary and their long-term success depend on their being linked together and kept alive through targeted participatory initiatives, such as the one outlined in this article, whose values and legacy depend both on the ability of actors to strengthen local networks without lapsing into excessive localism, and on the ability of academics to share the results of their research with other institutions and translate them for community use on a local and international scale.

In its innovative perspective, this first analysis has shown conclusively that, through downscaling and upscaling dynamics, this project enabled researchers to strengthen and redefine the range of meanings around a specific urban heritage: from a military feature, symbolizing war, defence, closure, fear and conflict to a bio-cultural ecosystem, where different people as well as species (for instance Mediterranean and Alpine vegetation) peacefully and productively coexist. The Wall's gates are now open to an increasing number of international tourists, whose gaze might also be guided – via the video and the guidebook our joint research has produced – towards a rejuvenated interpretation of this heritage.

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¹ “The Venetian works of defence between 15th and 17th centuries” site extends from the Pre Alps of Lombardy to the Eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, in the area between the western outpost (Bergamo, Italy) and the Bay of Kotor (Montenegro). Bergamo was incorporated into the Venetian State in 1428, and remained under its domain for over three centuries and a half. In 1588, after 27 years of intense work, imposing defensive walls were completed. These extend for more than 5 kilometres, reaching a height of up to 50 meters, and encircle most of the pre-existing city on the hill, which even today may be accessed only through four gates.

² More than 300 copies of the guidebook were printed first and delivered, at no cost, to the students involved and to public libraries across Bergamo. A second print was issued to be delivered to tourist offices for tourist use.

³ The video was shown to the public three times during conferences and events addressed to the children involved and to the citizenship. It is now available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMduyyvL07Y>. By the end of June 2016, it had secured 153.127 online viewings (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube). Backstage videos are also available on the University’s YouTube page. Among the videos published online by the University of Bergamo, the short film related to this project is indeed third (on a total of 30 videos) by number of views, while is by far the first on the University’s Facebook page with around 184.000 views.

⁴ In line with this, future developments of the project include a translation of the video and of the guidebook into other languages (English, Croatian and Montenegrin) and their dissemination across other partner cities. It will also be possible to activate international school exchanges, promote cooperation and replicate the project in each separate context, therefore enhancing the upscaling process.